



roy the Galaxy star by star, and who hold the secret of the genetic plague which decimated the primitive people among whom Danlo was fostered.

Danlo adventures through a galaxy riddled and modified by ancient history and gigantic technologies, and wars between humans vastened into gods (whose brains are not merely the size of planets, but of thousands of planets scattered through ordered clusters of stars). But in a book crammed with wonderful visions that convey with an intensely felt joy the huge scales of space and time, Zindell never loses sight of the human figures that animate it. Danlo is not a warrior, but, like a zen master, leads by example and teaching, gaining power by contemplation and insight and wit rather than military conquest as he pursues his quest, aided only by a querulous computer program which is all that remains of what was once a star-spanning god. He is also at times something of a prig, for his calm certitude gives him a maddening superiority which is never properly challenged by the mere humans among whom he moves (nor by the wannabe gods he encounters, in one of the finest passages of a book studded with startling scenes, in the virtual reality lands of the dead), and the great loopy metaphysical meditations on quiddity and godhood and much else which interrupt the narrative sometimes verge on inflating into shapeless purple prose.

And yet the whole remains robust and vital, glorious and gaudy, dizzily baroque and bristling with fierce self-assurance, and fully engaged with the wonders it relates. Zindell's ambition appears to be nothing less than to show how it feels and what it means to become a god. He shows no sign of faltering.

**N**ancy Kress's *Oaths and Miracles* (Tor, \$22.95) is a biomedical thriller that ten years ago would have been full-blown sf, which like the book itself shows how far and how fast genetic engineering has come. It deftly weaves three storylines – an FBI agent investigating the links between the murders of a Las Vegas showgirl and a scientist; the scientist's widow discovering that her own life is in danger when she tries to find out about her husband's link with a biotechnology firm; and an ex-marine obsessed with rescuing his children from the cult his wife has joined – around a conspiracy involving viruses which the Mafia are developing into a highly selective assassination tool.

The beginning shifts rather too quickly between the viewpoints of disposable characters before settling down, and the ending is perhaps a little too untidy and open for its chosen genre, while the plot, although dexterous in its meshing of its various

characters' obsessions, is ultimately about as believable as that of a superior episode of *The X-Files* (with which *Oaths and Miracles* shares a dogged, weary paranoia). Would the Mafia, which thrives on extortion backed by demonstrable threats of violence, really choose to pour millions into research for a weapon which kills its victims so unobtrusively?

No matter, for Kress excels at depicting lives at the margin and at the end of their tether; not even the FBI agent manages to get close to the shadowy movers and shakers of the conspiracy. Her sympathetically drawn characters operate in a finely observed America of motels and Stop'n'Shops and trailer parks. Kress's portrayal of FBI procedures and the clutter of working laboratories is detailed and convincing, and the development and operation of the assassination virus is both plausible and ingenious. This is a thriller which eschews flashy glamour and the easy fix of a shoot-em-up finale. Framing its scenerio within the ethics of genetic engineering, it takes its subject seriously, and so should we.

**C**hico Kidd (and I will take some convincing that this is *not* a pseudonym) is an English writer whose first novel *The Printer's Devil* (Baen, \$5.99) is a literate and very English ghost story which wears its proclaimed influences, particularly that of M. R. James, with considerable élan. Alan Bellman, a roving campanologist, becomes intrigued by the historical mystery concerning the self-styled wizard Roger Southwell, whose tomb lies outside the bounds of the church where Alan practises bell-ringing. Alan's investigations quickly lead to his possession by Southwell's unquiet spirit, and it is left to his wife and the ghost of one of Southwell's victims, whose story is interleaved with that of the contemporary couple, to save him.

It's an engaging story with a fine eye for atmosphere and the mild eccentricities of English character. Although a little disjointed by the abrupt switch in viewpoint midway, it deploys considerable learning about campanology, alchemy, and 17th-century London with a finely judged touch and a plethora of tongue-in-cheek footnotes. A strong debut that's worth seeking out.

**C**harles Sheffield somehow manages to maintain a regular output of hard sf, saturated in traditional virtue, for both Baen and Tor. *The Ganymede Club* (Tor, \$23.95) is set in the same future history as a previous novel, *Cold as Ice*, and like its predecessor features Rustum "Bat" Battachariya, an overweight, reclusive investigator with the sharp mind of Nero Wolfe and the precise diction of (can it be?) Isaac Asimov.

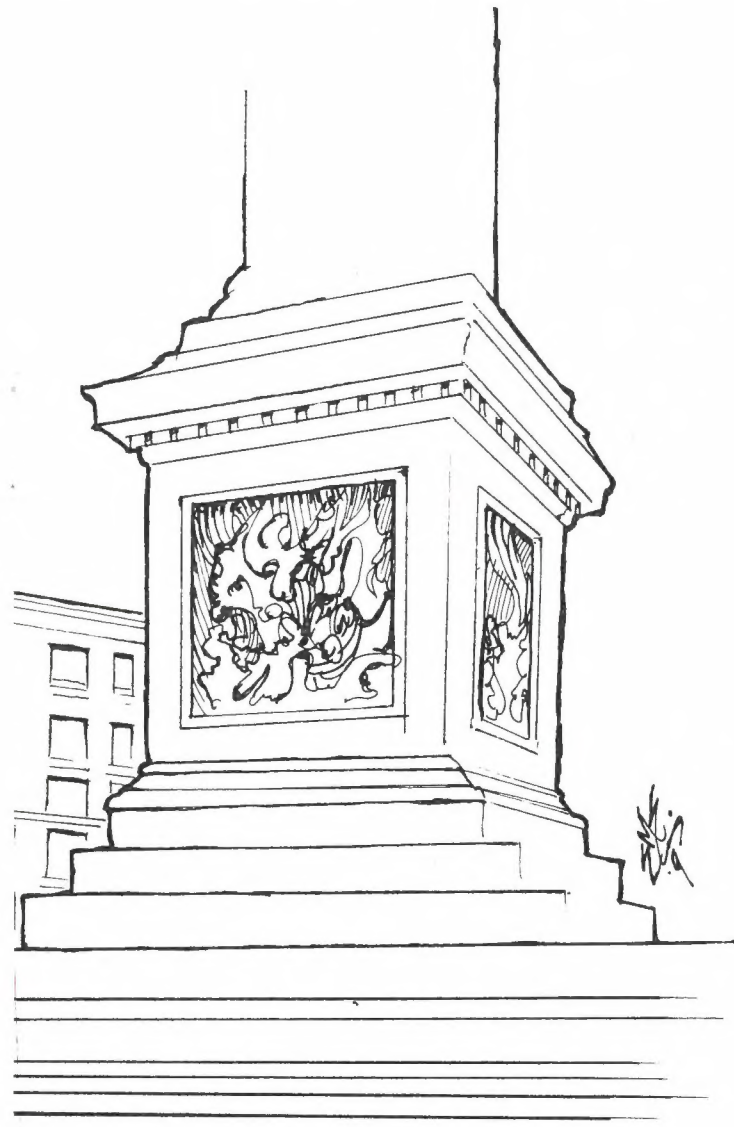
It is set on (or rather *in*) Ganymede, a few years after a fierce war has destroyed the northern hemisphere of Earth. Two refugees, Lola Belman (hmm, could it be that Sheffield... no, surely not), a psychotherapist, and her computer-obsessed teenage brother, Spook, become involved in a mystery surrounding one of Lola's patients, Bryce Sonnenberg, who suffers from flashback memories of a life not his own. Their investigations attract the unwelcome attention of the mysterious Ganymede Club, which sends an assassin after them, and they must enlist Bat's aid to unriddle the mystery of Bryce's true identity and the secret of the Ganymede Club.

It is a competent, fast-paced thriller which deploys its cliché elements (reclusive genius; teenage hacker; girl in peril; secret cabal) with skill, but it has the air of a formal exercise that could have been written any time in the last 20 years. Sheffield's underground colony is blandly sketched and underpopulated, and there's little of the crammed estrangement we've come to expect of cutting-edge depictions of the future, while the resolution of the mystery simply points us towards a sequel. Sheffield has done much better than this worthy but slightly dull effort; may he do so again.

*Also noted:*

Jamil Nasar's *Quasar* (Bantam, \$5.99) starts with tremendous brio when a down-at-heel psychiatric technician, Theodore Kormade, is lured into a life-threatening contract to cure Quasar Zant of her addiction to electroneural stimulation. Zant is heiress to one of the wealthiest families in a city hermetically sealed against Earth's ravaged biosphere, and in her memories are secrets which threaten the status quo: and what Kormade learns endangers both him and his patient. *Quasar's* virtue is its speed, but in the frantic plot, larded with undigested lumps of psychiatric jargon, the initially sympathetic characters of Kormade and Quasar are reduced to one dimension as they are chased through stock sf situations, including a raving torturess and a secret society of mutants inhabiting the city's cloaca. In the end, the novel outruns itself.

**Paul J. McAuley**



in her bed. In the kitchen the melting ice of the refrigerator had formed a large pool on the floor. There was no electric power, and the telephone was dead.

Resuming his journey, B systematically explored the neighbouring towns, circling them all as he approached central London. He was no longer surprised to find the huge metropolis totally deserted. He drove down an empty Piccadilly, crossed Trafalgar Square in silence and parked outside the unguarded Buckingham Palace. As dusk fell he decided to return to Shepperton. He had almost run out of fuel and was forced to break into a filling station. However, no policemen were out on patrol or in their stations. He left behind him an immense city plunged into darkness, where the only lights were the reflections of his headlamps.

B passed a disturbed night, with the radio mute beside his bed. But when he woke to another luminous morning his confidence returned. After an initial doubt, he was relieved to see that Shepperton was still deserted. The food within his refrigerator had begun to rot; he needed fresh provisions and a means of cooking for himself. He drove into Shepperton, broke a window of the supermarket and collected several cartons of canned meat and vegetables, rice and sugar. In the hardware store he found a paraffin

stove, and look it home with a tin of fuel. Water no longer flowed in the mains, but he estimated that the contents of the roof cistern would last him a week or more. Further forays to the local stores furnished him with a supply of candles, torches and batteries.

In the following week B made several expeditions to London. He returned to the houses and flats of his friends, but found them empty. He broke into Scotland Yard and the newspaper offices in Fleet Street, in the hope of finding some explanation for the disappearance of an entire population. Lastly, he entered the Houses of Parliament, and stood in the silent debating chamber of the Commons, breathing the stale air. However, there was not the least explanation anywhere of what had taken place. In the streets of the city he saw not a single cat or dog. It was only when he visited London Zoo that he found that the birds still remained within their cages. They seemed delighted to see B, but flew off with famished cries when he unlocked the bars.

So at least he had a kind of companionship. During the next month, and throughout the summer, B continued his preparations for survival. He drove as far north as Birmingham without seeing a soul, then drove down to the south coast and followed the road from Brighton to Dover. Standing on the cliffs, he gazed at the distant shoreline of France. In the marina he chose a motor-boat with a full tank of fuel, and set out across the calm sea, now free of the customary pleasure-craft, petroleum tankers and cross-channel ferries. At Calais he wandered for an hour through the deserted streets, and in the silent shops listened in vain to telephones that never replied. Then he retraced his steps to the port and returned to England.

When the summer was followed by a mild autumn, B had established a pleasant and comfortable existence for himself. He had abundant stocks of tinned food, fuel and water with which to survive the winter. The river was nearby, clear and free of all pollution, and petrol was easy to obtain, in unlimited quantities, from the filling stations and parked cars. At the local police station he assembled a small armoury of pistols and carbines, to deal with any unexpected menace that might appear.

But his only visitors were the birds, and he scattered handfuls of rice and seeds on the lawn of his garden and on those of his former neighbours. Already he had begun to forget them, and Shepperton soon became an extraordinary aviary, filled with birds of every species.

Thus the year ended peacefully, and B was ready to begin his true work.

**Copyright © J.G. Ballard, 1984**

**J. G. Ballard** wrote the above piece in 1981 for a French small-press magazine. It subsequently appeared in English in the poetry magazine *Ambit* (Spring 1984), but has not been reprinted since. As it is our favourite "vignette" of his, we thought it well worth reintroducing to readers here.